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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S 2008 ELECTION: MEDIA FREEDOM  
ENVIRONMENT CONSTRICTING

REF: BAKU 00524

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Media contacts state that media in Azerbaijan has worsened under a "personally insecure" president, who has condoned a clampdown on influential, critical media outlets. They point to a number of factors behind the gradual, but steady, decline in media freedom since Ilham Aliyev took office in 2003, including: GOAJ harassment of journalists, the judiciary's lack of independence, a limited advertising market that is dominated by pro-government publications, self-censorship, and a lack of professionalism in Azerbaijan's media industry. President Aliyev in July approved a new program to develop the media (septel) designed by media representatives. Some observers are skeptical of a government role in such an effort; Azerbaijan's leadership has requested U.S. assistance in organizing and implementing the fund. The development of the media as a strong institution of Azerbaijan's democracy is a long-term effort and requires sustained U.S. support. End Summary.

12. (C) This cable is part of a series on the broader political environment before the October 15 Presidential election. The Embassy met with seven media professionals to hear their perspectives on the overall media environment, including Shelly Markoff (IREX chief of party), Khadija Ismayilova (Radio Liberty Baku bureau chief), Rashid Hajili (Media Rights Institute director), Mehman Aliyev (Turan News Agency director), Emin Huseynov (Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety director), Osman Gunduz (Multimedia Information Systems & Technologies Center director), and Elnur Baimov (www.day.az editor-in-chief).

Media Freedom Declining  
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13. (C) The consensus among media professionals is that media freedom declined in Azerbaijan under President Ilham Aliyev. Media professionals we spoke with unanimously agreed that the media was more free and robust in the late 1990s during the later years of former President Heydar Aliyev. Reflecting a common theme, Ismayilova told us President Ilham Aliyev is insecure and cannot tolerate criticism, which distinguishes him from his father. President Heydar Aliyev regularly engaged directly with local journalists, while Ilham Aliyev does not. At the same time, the media representatives claim

President Aliyev and other government insiders perceive that the political cost of clamping down on the media is minimal, as the GOAJ increasingly judges that Western states need Azerbaijan as much or more than Azerbaijan needs the West. The GOAJ also appears to see minimal domestic costs for keeping the media on a short leash, as there is little in the way of public clamor for a more vibrant media.

14. (C) The GOAJ's answer to the problem of developing Azerbaijan's media is a state program on supporting the media. In a September 11 meeting with the Ambassador, Presidential Administration Public Policy Chief Ali Hasanov discussed the GOAJ's plan for supporting the media. On July 31, President Aliyev signed a "concept paper," drawn up by Azerbaijan's Media Council and editors-in-chief of various Azerbaijani newspapers. Hasanov said that the purpose of the GOAJ's program would be to support development of the media as an independent institution that could work freely and independently in a commercial environment. Hasanov acknowledged government support for commercial operations of media outlets would be difficult to manage, and noted he was open to U.S. assistance on developing the media development program. Having recently returned from a trip to the U.S., where he met with DRL A/S Kramer and EUR DAS Bryza and attended the Democratic National Convention, Hasanov appeared to have a fresh attitude toward cooperating with the media.

15. (C) President Aliyev in August also unveiled a new state program providing direct grants to some 35 media outlets. The one-time grants are the initial phase of the broader state program to support development of the media that Hasanov raised in his meeting with the Ambassador. Local

opinion is divided as to whether the program reflects a serious effort by the GOAJ to support the development of the media or a move designed primarily to deflect western criticism of Azerbaijan's media environment.

Television: Most Popular and Controlled Medium  
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16. (C) Following a broad post-Soviet trend, the majority of Azerbaijanis get their news from television. Well-educated Azerbaijanis, however, increasingly complain that the state-dominated television channels are uninteresting and lack substantive political discussion. For years, ANS was the leading beacon of semi-independent television programming; it overwhelmingly was the most popular station. In late 2006, the National Radio and Television Council (NRTC) forced ANS off the air for several weeks, with the NRTC claiming ANS was violating the national media law. All seven media professionals interviewed argued that ANS editorial line has become considerably less aggressive since it was temporarily shut down; in previous meetings, ANS chief Vahid Mustafayev conceded that the station more cautiously approaches stories at this time, arguing that Azerbaijan is at war and even democratic countries suspend liberties during time of war.

17. (C) Experts agree the GOAJ is most concerned with controlling the editorial line of television because it remains the most influential source of information. In an indication that the GOAJ has largely succeeded in influencing television's editorial line, Hajili observed that harassment of journalists has almost entirely focused on print media journalists, vice television journalists. One potentially positive development in the overall trend of declining television freedom is the public television station (ITV), which, while clearly a state-run channel, has begun to air more nuanced, less blatantly pro-government programming. Several experts suggested the station had some degree of independence and the station chief has sought to introduce some limited political discussions, although experts were divided over the station's relative degree of political independence and the station's level of professionalism. ITV recently aired the U.S. Presidential debates, dubbed in Azerbaijani. The Foreign Minister, who has taken the lead in promoting a modern media by instituting the first-ever

regular weekly ministerial press conferences at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), said MFA is now working with ITV to introduce a limited "Meet the Press" type discussion program on foreign affairs. A Fulbright Fellow with 20 years experience on the McNeil-Lehrer show is assisting in developing the program.

¶18. (C) A local study monitoring the media in the run-up to the Presidential election, which is funded by the Council of Europe, concluded in its initial report that the media -- particularly television -- provided a limited spectrum of political views and actors. A respected local NGO (New Generation) focusing on the media climate conducted the study using quantitative analysis. Their Oct. 6 report noted that TV channels in the Sept. 17-Oct. 2 campaign period paid little attention to election activity, particularly that of the opposition. While Public TV and ANS were able to devote more attention to opposition candidates (14 percent for Public TV, 24 percent for ANS), AzTV, Khazar and ATV focused on the ruling party and its candidate for 99 percent of their election coverage.

¶19. (C) One election-related media issue is candidates' access to television. The election code, which was revised in June, no longer permits the major state-owned television channel (AzTV) to provide free air time to presidential candidates. Instead, ITV is supposed to provide free air time to candidates. According to ODHIR, the points of concern are that AzTV currently has a greater geographic reach than ITV and that AzTV may be exempt from providing balanced news coverage for the candidates. (NOTE: The ITV director told ODHIR that ITV reaches 85 percent of Azerbaijani territory, in comparison to AzTV, which reaches all of Azerbaijan.) CEC Chairman Mazahir Panahov told OSCE Ambassadors that ITV will provide three hours of free air

time per week to candidates. (In the 2005 Parliamentary elections, AzTV was required to provide six hours of free air time - reftel.) This free air time has been employed in the form of moderated discussions between the candidates or their proxies.

#### Radio: Most Underused Media

¶10. (C) Radio Liberty, BBC and VOA Azerbaijani services provide more news for radio listeners than the rest of the FM and AM dial combined. Radio Liberty, which produces 10 hours of local news programming daily, dominates the radio market, but just over 2 percent of Azerbaijanis say they get their news from radio. While RFE/RL President Jeff Gedmin heard complaints from the government about imbalance during his spring visit to Baku the TV and Radio Council has repeatedly assured the Embassy that license renewals -- due in September -- are not a problem. By all standards, Radio Liberty's election coverage has been the most vigorous of any media in Azerbaijan, though the ruling party's representatives have often declined invitations to participate in debates with opposition candidates and surrogates.

#### Print Media: A Thousand Flavors, But Who is Reading?

¶11. (C) According to an Internews media study, more than 1,900 newspapers are registered in Azerbaijan. The vast majority of these are not news-focused publications, but instead small newspapers or newsletters with a run of several hundred copies that provide information for specific organizations, government ministries, or individuals. The Embassy estimates that in Baku there are fewer than 25 newspapers that would fit the western definition, and just a dozen of them have circulations larger than 2,500. Even the most popular dailies have print runs of only 6,000-9,000 copies, this in a city of more than two million. Even those figures are inflated, according to a report this week.

¶12. (C) The commercial model under which newspapers are operated as commercial businesses and rely primarily on

advertising revenue is totally absent in Azerbaijan, leading to a distortion of the very nature of media. In general, most newspapers fall into the partisan categories of "pro-government" or "pro-opposition." While the government papers tend to be a chronicle of GOAJ activities, opposition papers often are a sea of sensationalistic stories designed to gather attention rather than accurately report the facts. Both are essentially fully-funded branches of either the government or the opposition. There is virtually no commercial advertising. The two most popular opposition dailies, Azadliq (Freedom) and Yeni Musavat (New Equality) are paid for entirely by the opposition Azadliq political bloc and the Musavat political party, respectively. They do not seek to hide their political affiliations and run photos of their leaders on the front page of every issue, whether they have done anything newsworthy or not.

¶13. (C) On the other hand, Huseynov and other commentators told us that print media has a greater degree of freedom relative to television and interesting, critical articles can still be found. Most experts agree that the Russian-language daily Zerkalo is the most respected and independent newspaper. Many independent media experts also argued the GOAJ controls the distribution of newspapers through unofficial economic monopolies, and it can accordingly "punish" print outlets by tightening their distribution reach as well as their advertising revenue.

#### Internet: Bright Spot to Meet Growing Demand

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¶14. (C) The internet is the freest source of information inside Azerbaijan, and it appears to be growing as the medium of choice for educated Azerbaijanis who can afford regular access, according to most experts. Multimedia Information Systems & Technologies Center director Osman Gunduz told us Azerbaijanis favor online news over traditional print newspapers, as approximately three times the number of

Azerbaijanis look to the internet instead of print media as their primary news source. (Gunduz estimated there are approximately 150,000 Azerbaijanis using the web as their primary information source, compared to 40,000 who read newspapers as their primary source of news.) While the internet can be a reliable source of information about the outside world, there are a limited number of websites providing reliable Azerbaijani domestic news.

¶15. (C) Gunduz said there is no official GOAJ censorship of the internet, although in practice, GOAJ insiders can shut down individual websites. Gunduz told us internet access in Azerbaijan is granted through Delta Telecom, which provides access to smaller, local internet provider companies. Gunduz said Delta Telecom is an economic monopoly connected to the Presidential Administration, and that it also serves as an informal mechanism for shutting down select internet sites. Gunduz said Vahid Akhundov, the head of the Presidential Security Service (PSS), is linked to the owner, but we have also heard that the nephew of Deputy Head of the PSS Baylor Eyyubov -- who reports to Akhundov on paper, but unofficially is rumored to hold the real reins of power within PSS -- runs Delta Telecom.

¶16. (C) The most popular news website in Azerbaijan is [www.day.az](http://www.day.az). The primary site is in Russian, although there is an English-language mirror site at [www.today.az](http://www.today.az). The articles tend to be tightly drafted factual reports on a range of political, economic, and social topics, vice investigative journalism. While the website tends to avoid examining politically-sensitive topics like corruption, the articles feature comments from a broad spectrum of pro-government, independent, and opposition actors. Editor-in-chief Baimov told us there are approximately 25,000 daily readers and the site receives about 300,000 daily hits.

#### Major Problems in the Media Environment

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¶17. (C) Several long-term, mutually-reinforcing factors have eroded the media freedom environment in Azerbaijan. Critical print journalists have been beaten, imprisoned, or harassed. The pattern appears to be GOAJ insiders targeting journalists who are perceived as critics of the government's policies or of certain officials, or those who go too far in investigating an elite's financial fiefdoms. Kompromat -- the widely-known Russian term for acquiring derogatory information on someone that could be used as blackmail -- is a key driver in Azerbaijan's political economy, wedding elites in a complex interaction of distrust and collaboration. In what can be called a "culture of kompromat," investigative journalism touching on an elite's personal financial interests quickly crosses a redline. According to a wide range of government and civil society contacts, print media outlets are frequently controlled behind the scenes by oligarchs or GOAJ officials and are used to advance personal financial and political interests.

¶18. (C) Another challenge is a string of dubious court proceedings initiated against journalists who are often charged with libel. Ismayilova argued that the executive's control of the judiciary, which prevents journalists from having a neutral outlet for legally addressing the incidents of harassment and intimidation, is a core problem. Experts also argued that the cumulative impact of multiple attacks against journalists is greater than the sum of the individual episodes, generating a climate of fear of criticizing members of the elite. Since 2006 there have been 11 journalists arrested and imprisoned for reasons considered by domestic and international observers to be politically motivated. Five of these journalists, all convicted of libel, were released by presidential pardon in December 2007 while two were released after their cases were overturned on appeal. The pace of libel cases filed by government officials has diminished in the pre-election period. Of the four remaining imprisoned journalists, three are prominent opposition journalists convicted of terrorism, hooliganism, and narcotics possession whose cases have been raised to the GOAJ by the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the USG. Embassy officials have received indications from the GOAJ that these

three journalists may be released after the election. The fourth case involves due process violations concerning the airing of video footage of alleged bribery on national television, and his release is not considered imminent.

¶19. (C) Local experts repeatedly cite lack of a local advertising market as a key compounding factor that limits the degree of media freedom. Aliyev and others opined that the economic basis of independent media outlets is steadily constricting. Over the past few years, limited advertising dollars increasingly have migrated to television and print media outlets that are perceived as "pro-government," leaving opposition or independent outlets with limited means. Aliyev told us the advertising market for television is rapidly growing (tripling over the past three years), but remains "stagnant" for print media. Ismayilova and Markoff said banks and mobile telephone providers are major sources of advertising dollars, but these companies are linked to elite insiders, who selectively back pro-government media outlets. Experts said that opposition-oriented publications often run on a shoe-string budget, which leaves them open to writing sensationalistic stories with limited or no sourcing, or vulnerable to corruption and influence from shadowy "patrons." Media experts note the urgent need to assist both print and television outlets to learn how to run them commercially as businesses, a strategy that could work if businesses are permitted to make their own decisions about where to spend advertising dollars without government influence, they say.

In the Context of the Upcoming Elections  
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¶20. (C) In the days before the October 15 presidential election, most experts we spoke with thought the GOAJ might grant more political space to the press. These experts



argued that President Aliyev feels confident of winning the election and that from the GOAJ's perspective, more harm than good could be done in having to deal with a high-profile media rights issue while there is increased international scrutiny of Azerbaijan's pre-election political climate. Most commentators agreed that if there was a more relaxed environment before and during the election, it would likely be "business as usual" after the election.

121. (C) These analysts argued that the problems with media freedom are part of a broader trend, with several noting a domestic parallel between Azerbaijan and Russia. Ismayilova said the GOAJ is "eliminating platforms of discussion" and replacing them with GOAJ-orchestrated forums.

#### Ideas to Support Media Freedom

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122. (C) When asked for recommendations on how to promote positive changes in the media climate, Ismayilova suggested U.S. support for a South Caucasus television station, which would be admittedly expensive, but central to opening up an alternative information source for populations eager for information and promoting regional integration. Other experts suggested the U.S. increasingly focus its assistance on internet news and radio broadcasting over the internet, since it is relatively cheap and Azerbaijanis increasingly are looking to the internet for their information. Aliyev also stressed the need for more systematic interaction between state officials and journalists and more training for spokespeople. Finally, Husyenov suggested that U.S. officials should encourage the GOAJ to privatize the state media agencies, appealing to Azerbaijan's stated desire to modernize its political institutions.

123. (C) COMMENT: The development of the media as a strong democratic institution in Azerbaijan is a long-term task, requiring consistent effort by the government to create the legal, economic and political conditions for a free press to develop, and an effort by the media to develop the professional standards needed. Support for independent media and professionalization of journalists has been the top priority of the Embassy's public diplomacy programming in recent years. Projects have ranged from journalism training

at the Georgia Institute for Public Affairs and the newly created American-Azerbaijan Journalism Academy, to financing an innovative NGO media monitoring project that rates the professional and ethical performance of daily newspapers. The Ambassador and other Embassy officers also regularly press the GOAJ to remove the legal prohibition against libel from the criminal to the civil code. There is still much to be done, as standards remain low, and improving the work of journalists must be accompanied by the GOAJ loosening control of media institutions and allowing normal interaction with advertisers. Only a financially independent media -- free of government, political party, and financial "patrons" influence, and one fully trained in professional journalistic ethics -- will be able to play the Fourth Estate role so important in vibrant democracies.

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